

Image-editing software

Can the latest batch of image-editing programs give you the perfect picture? Adam Banks tests six packages to find out

Now that digital cameras have taken over the world, almost every PC user needs a way of organising and editing their images. Your camera may come with software for the purpose, and there are several free programs you can download, including Google's Picasa (<http://picasa.google.com>) and Corel's Snapfire (www.snapfire.com). For a full range of photo correction, enhancement and creative features, however, you'll need a proper image-editing program. We've reviewed five leading contenders, plus Xara Xtreme, a slightly different proposition. At around £60, they're all good value.

All the programs here, except Xara Xtreme, include certain core functions. They include filters to adjust tone ellipsis, colour and apply special effects, and selection tools that let you cut out areas of an image, either by drawing around them with the mouse or using various methods to select like-coloured regions or follow edges. To build up a composition, images and cutouts can be stacked in layers, each with its own transparency setting; each layer may also have a blending mode, determining how it affects underlying layers, and optional effects, such as shadows. You can also create objects by drawing vector shapes, which can

be edited and resized. Text is handled in a similar way, and layer effects can give any of these a textured or 3D appearance with a couple of clicks. Finally, there are dozens of tools that you can use directly on an image to lighten, darken, blur or sharpen areas, remove blemishes or simulate paints and other art media.

Most image editors also come with an organiser, which catalogues pictures from selected folders on your PC and displays them as thumbnails at an adjustable size, preferably controlled 'live' using a zoom slider. You'll be able to sort them by any of the usual file properties – name, date and so on – and by keywords and/or 'tags' that you assign to each image. Creating slideshows is another common feature, and to share your slideshow with other people you'll want to be able to save it as a video file or burn it to disc.

With image editors getting more advanced and image files larger, you'll need a decent PC to work efficiently, although you can get away with lesser systems if you don't mind the occasional wait. Our modest test PC, a 1.4GHz Pentium 4 system with 512MB of RAM, started to feel sluggish with the likes of Photoshop Elements 5, especially when using lots of layers and effects.

SOFTWARE LABS

Free and easy? The GIMP project

The GNU Image Manipulation Program, or GIMP, is a long-running project to create a free image editor. GNU is a UNIX-style operating system that's available for various computing platforms, including the PC. Most of the core functions found in the other programs on test are also in the GIMP, and it has quite a few clever extras, but no project wizards or organiser. Photoshop plug-ins aren't supported, although add-ons are available in the GIMP's own format, if you can figure out how to install them. Thanks to a supplied plug-in called Free Type, the latest version of the GIMP recognises and supports your installed Windows fonts.

Probably the biggest drawback of the GIMP is its user interface. Palettes and images float around on their own instead of existing within a program window. You can arrange them all into something approximating the multi-document interface of a conventional Windows application, or indeed something completely different; an important feature of the GIMP is customisability. But working with ordinary windows, which can't be snapped into position like palettes and can disappear behind each other, is awkward and unwieldy.

If you can get used to this, you'll find plenty in the GIMP to rival other image editors, and most of the individual tools and filters feel familiar. There are also some creative effects that give more usable results than their equivalents in most other programs. However, effects can be tricky to adjust because they're previewed at a small fixed size and/or with no zoom option.



▲ The GIMP has a range of editing tools to rival many commercial packages, and it's free – but it's not the friendliest application to use

The GIMP is primarily available as source code from www.gimp.org. Unless you're into programming, you'll need a Windows install package, which you can find in the Expert Toolkit of the *Computer Shopper* DVD or download from <http://gimp-win.sourceforge.net>. You install the GTK+ 2 runtime environment first, then the GIMP application, and optionally the help files. On first running the program, there are more setup tasks to complete. It will run under Windows 98 or Me, but XP, 2000 or NT4 are recommended.

The GIMP is a great example of open-source development, but most consumers will get more out of one of the reasonably priced commercial packages reviewed here.

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ADOBE

Photoshop Elements 5.0

★★★★★

£60 inc VAT



Photoshop Elements offers a surprisingly large number of its big brother's professional features and a few of its own. In this latest version, the user interface gets the 'reversed out' look popularised by high-end applications such as Apple's Aperture and Adobe's Lightroom, with white text on a grey background.

You can work either in Full Edit mode or Quick Fix, which replaces the usual palettes with simplified correction tools such as Red Eye, Lighten Shadows and Sharpen. In Full Edit mode, the Styles and Effects palette has been renamed Artwork and Effects, and gains five tabs to switch between functions ranging from backgrounds to text effects. Frame Layers support a range of new edge effects, one of several additions aimed at digital scrapbooking: arranging photos into creative layouts.

This is also reflected in major changes to the Photo Creations feature. Instead of stepping through a wizard to create a greetings card, album

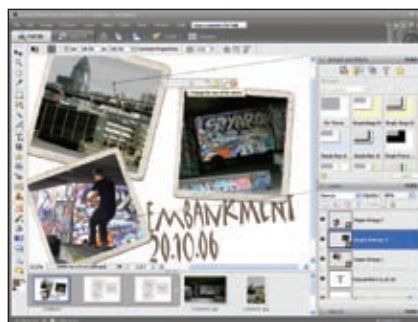
page or CD cover, you now choose a Template, which governs the basic layout, and a Theme, which controls the cosmetics such as colour and edge effects. The graphics are beautifully designed, and your selected Photo Creation appears as a normal image file that you can customise by dropping photos into the frames, switching the Theme or using any of Photoshop Elements' usual tools. You can also create slideshows, exported as video or PDF files, and produce attractive Flash-based web galleries.

Photoshop Elements offers plenty of professional adjustment features, but previously lacked tone curves, a classic tool for massaging light and shade. This is now partly redressed by Adjust Color Curves, which presents the same function using Adobe's 'variations' system, where you choose between several possible adjustments by eye. Other new editing features include Convert to Black and White, which helps you get the best results when converting colour photos to monochrome, and Correct Camera Distortion, which

SUMMARY

- ✓ Well presented and easy to use
- ✓ Great mix of core and creative features
- ✗ Still lacks a few advanced functions

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Media Center Edition with Service Pack 2, Pentium 4 or Celeron 1.4GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.adobe.com/uk



▲ Photoshop Elements 5 includes several new features, such as the ability to create multi-page files, as seen in the Photo Bin (bottom left)

provides several lens correction tools in one place, enabling you to fix bent scenes with the minimum of fuss.

Elements' Organizer module offers all the tagging, keywording, categorising and searching options you could wish for, plus the clever idea of 'stacks'. When you've taken several snaps of the same scene, it's annoying to wade through them all as you browse your photo collection. Using stacks, you can group them so that only your favourite one is shown. The Organizer can form stacks automatically, based on time taken and visual similarity, and when you edit a photo, a special stack called a Version Set can group the original with your retouched version(s).

This is a stonking upgrade to an excellent package, and superb value, except perhaps if you're upgrading from version 4, in which case you will save only about a tenner.

COREL

Paint Shop Pro Photo XI

★★★★★

£66 inc VAT

This is Paint Shop Pro's second upgrade under the Corel banner, and it's looking tidier and friendlier while continuing to gain features. In fact, Adobe and Corel seem determined to outdo each other at the moment, which is good news for users.

A familiar arrangement of toolbars and palettes conceals some clever innovations. Across the bottom is a palette resembling Photoshop Elements' Photo Bin, which shows thumbnails of open files. This is actually Paint Shop Pro's Organizer, complete with zoom slider, search and sort options, and a tree listing that shows picture folders allowing you to apply tags. You can double-click the palette's title bar to resize it as big as you want, then double-click again to send it back home. This simple idea makes browsing and editing feel far more integrated.

Another Organizer feature is Quick Review. This displays a slideshow of your selected images with play, forward and back buttons. When you click Pause, extra buttons appear to auto-correct the image, rotate it or add

a caption. When it comes to creating slideshows, however, the options are limited, and slideshows can be saved only in Snapfire Show format for use with Corel's free photo application.

Paint Shop Pro has a comprehensive set of editing tools, to which this upgrade adds commands for colour changing, distressed effects, skin smoothing and more. Advanced users will appreciate features such as layer masks and tone curves, which seem to have been omitted from Photoshop Elements purely to differentiate it from the full version of Photoshop. Both Curves and Levels have integral histogram displays, so you can see the effect of your changes on the image's tonal range, an important pro editing feature.

The Learning Center palette helps to explain the program's capabilities, but for a really easy start, various One-Step fixes tackle basic colour correction, noise reduction and so on. Smart Photo Fix offers a halfway house, with simplified adjustment sliders. And for more creative jobs, there are tools reminiscent of Corel's Painter natural media

SUMMARY

- ✓ Well presented and easy to use
- ✓ Comprehensive image-editing tools
- ✗ Lacks layer effects and project wizards

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 with Service Pack 4/Windows XP with Service Pack 2, 466MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 500MB disk space, Internet Explorer 6
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.corel.com



▲ Corel has done a good job of tidying up Paint Shop Pro, but some features are still missing that have become standard for modern image editors

software, including 'wet' and 'dry' media layers and a Trace mode to turn photos into paintings.

Two things are missing, though. First, layer effects. In Photoshop Elements, PhotoImpact or PhotoPlus, once you've created a cutout object, either by drawing a vector shape or selecting part of an image, you can instantly give it a soft drop shadow, turn it into a shiny gel button or add hundreds of other effects. This can add impact to collages, posters, scrapbook pages, web graphics and many other projects. The second omission is template-based wizards to create these kinds of documents. Corel has addressed this by including Snapfire Plus SE (the advanced, paid-for edition), which covers this ground. Unfortunately, the 'SE' indicates that you only get a 30-day demo.

Paint Shop Pro Photo XI is a great choice for no-compromise photo enhancement, but it needs to keep up with the trend to encourage casual creativity.

MICROSOFT

Digital Image 2006 Suite Edition

★★★★

£50 inc VAT

The name of this product is a mystery. Even Microsoft isn't sure in what order the words '2006', 'Suite' and 'Edition' are meant to appear, and as we went to press it released Digital Image Suite Anniversary Edition, which is the same package bundled with special offers mostly relevant to the US. The functionality is also a bit confused.

Digital Image Suite, as we'll call it, has no toolbox. Instead, both the left and right of the screen are occupied by palettes, turned on and off by three buttons at the top. The Common Tasks pane, at the left, presents a categorised list of commands, duplicating some, but not all, of those in the menus. Everything is a 'task': something that you start, carry out by following a prescribed sequence of steps, then finish. This may appeal to beginners, but it's frustratingly cumbersome.

The Files pane shows thumbnails of open documents, while the Stacks pane is similar to a Layers palette. Microsoft seems unfazed by the fact that 'stacks' is an established term for

something different, as seen in Photoshop Elements' Organizer. Layers in the Stack are called objects. You can apply transparency to an object as an effect, but it's not an integral property, as in conventional image editors.

There's also a variety of decorated frames to add to objects, but more sensible options such as soft shadows are limited. Worst of all, when you apply an effect such as a soft shadow, the object is flattened, meaning that vector shapes can no longer be scaled or text edited. This misses the point of layer styles and effects. General text handling is very good, though: you can set blocks of type with alignment, word wrap and even indents and bullets.

Create a Project launches wizards for a vast range of cards, calendars, labels, brochures and so on (supplied on a second CD), which, like most Microsoft templates, are an aesthetic car crash. As in previous versions, many of the 5,000 clip art images appear to have been created by a Key Stage 1 class on a rainy afternoon. Digital Image Library, a separate application, has

SUMMARY

- ✓ Interesting range of features
- ✗ Task-based presentation is frustrating
- ✗ Creative features extensive but poor

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, 700MHz Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 400MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com/uk



▲ Digital Image Suite is a usable photo editor, but its features are shallow and the task-based approach makes image enhancement a chore

improved support for tags and keywords. It still lacks a general search tool, but it does have archiving tools to aid backup. Thumbnails in the main window can be quickly resized with a zoom slider, and they pop up a larger preview when you roll the mouse over them, which is handy. Photo Story 3.1, already offered free to anyone with a genuine copy of Windows, is included to create video slideshows that can be exported for mobile phone viewing, DVD burning and so on.

Despite a fairly good range of adjustments and filters, including a new Black and White Effects tool and Camera Raw support, we cannot recommend Digital Image Suite. Microsoft's forthcoming Expression suite (www.microsoft.com/products/expression) shows a more mature approach to graphics software under Windows Vista, and we can only hope this eventually extends to photo editing.

SERIF

PhotoPlus 11 Studio Pack

★★★★★

£60 inc VAT

PhotoPlus has always worked hard to earn its place among the leading packages, and around version 10 it started to look like a real contender. It offers all the core features you'd hope for, including layer handling that's more reminiscent of Paint Shop Pro's full functionality than Photoshop Elements' cut-down approach. Advanced users will be interested to learn that it allows you to work directly on the individual red, green and blue (RGB) channels making up a colour image, something that the other packages leave out.

The Studio Pack upgrade brings several enhancements, including QuickFix Studio. Rather than offering alternative commands within the program's main display, this opens a separate window with a large 'before and after' preview of your image. You can experiment with several adjustments before you apply the end result. The options include straightening and cropping tools, colour, brightness and contrast sliders and a red-eye filter as well as new corrections for camera lens distortion and chromatic aberration.

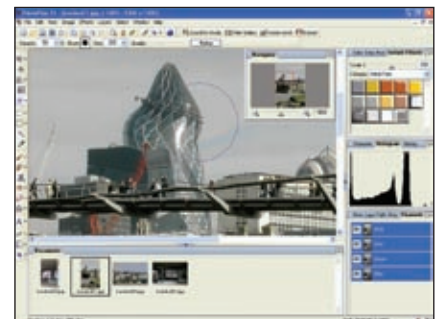
QuickFix Studio isn't as useful as it could have been, though. The way it works is annoyingly different from the main program; for example, the mouse wheel changes settings instead of zooming in and out, which we found really confusing. The adjustment options aren't ideal, either. Brightness and Contrast may look simpler than Levels and Curves, but they give poorer results. Under Colour, adjusting white balance by selecting the kind of light in which a photo was shot is not a very effective method, although the manual sliders provided are more practical. Lens distortion isn't something you'll often need to worry about in practice.

In general, however, PhotoPlus has plenty of good features, including an exceptional range of warping tools. Text handling was a weak point in earlier versions, but is now satisfactory, and layer effects are well supported, although the presets aren't quite as attractive as Photoshop Elements' or as plentiful as PhotolImpact's. A new screen capture utility, similar to Paint Shop Pro's, helps grab images from other software running on your PC. There are also web design tools

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive image-editing tools
- ✓ Wide range of features
- ✗ Lacks creative wizards and templates

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/XP/2000, Pentium or equivalent processor, 256MB RAM, 245MB disk space
SUPPLIER Serif 08003 767070
DETAILS www.serif.com/store



▲ Although it lacks some of the bells and whistles of its big-name rivals, Serif PhotoPlus has a solid set of image-editing tools

for image slicing and image maps (where clicking on areas of an image activates different links), and you can create simple frame-based animations. If you're into this kind of work, these features may be very useful, although they haven't been upgraded in version 11.

The Studio Pack includes AlbumPlus 4, a basic photo organiser with archiving and a few 'quick fix' options. Although it lacks a freeform search tool, Smart Tags let you show all images that meet certain criteria. You can set up and play slideshows, but there doesn't appear to be any way of exporting these to share them with other users, and there are no templates or wizards for creative projects.

PhotoPlus's lack of creative extras is shared by Paint Shop Pro, and while it isn't as neat as Photoshop Elements, it's less limited in some respects. It's a very capable general-purpose image editor at a competitive price.

ULEAD

PhotolImpact 12

★★★★★

£50 inc VAT



PhotolImpact looks similar to other image editors at first glance, but it tends to do things its own way.

Some idiosyncrasies of earlier versions have been smoothed out: for example, layers are now handled in a reasonably standard way. Others remain, such as when you choose a tool from the toolbox on the left, the palettes on the right jump around to show related options, which is quite disorienting.

Previously, beginners could choose Basic mode, which hid scarier options. This has been replaced by a choice of Full Edit and ExpressFix modes. With a 'before and after' preview and a small set of photo correction options, ExpressFix does simplify things, but 'basic' is still the word that springs to mind. To ease you into the full editing experience, a SmartGuide provides effective step-by-step help.

You can also choose to work in Web mode or Video & DVD mode, although we couldn't spot the difference. The Component Designer provides reams of templates, buttons and other elements to help

you create webpages, although designing pages in a bitmap-editing program isn't a great way to create a website. Ulead's GIF Animator program is also included. PhotolImpact lets you design DVD menus, too, but you'll need a separate authoring program to burn a disc.

PhotolImpact is notable for its cool ready-made layer effects, including glass and metal. Advanced image correction tools are also plentiful, with commands such as Curves presented with 'before and after' previews and plenty of methods for cutting out objects from images. Text is treated both as vector shapes and as a bitmap selection at the same time, letting you apply effects yet still being able to edit it.

There are some powerful brush tools, covering not only painted effects but also subtle photo retouching. Some surprising extras are thrown in, too; for example, Creative Transform lets you apply warping effects similar to Photoshop Elements' Liquify and even animate the process. You can combine multiple shots of a scene to create high dynamic range (HDR) images, an unusual feature for a consumer program.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Wide range of features
- ✓ Cool creative extras
- ✗ Doesn't quite hang together

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 650MB disk space
 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
 DETAILS www.ulead.co.uk



▲ Ulead PhotolImpact is great value, so it's well worth a look if you like to experiment. For everyday tasks, however, it can be a bit of a pain

The Share button launches creative wizards including PhotoProject, Calendar, Web Album and Web Slideshow. PhotoProject's greetings card and CD cover templates look pretty slick, if a bit cheesy. PhotolImpact comes with Photo Explorer, a decent organiser program, and PhotolImpact Album, aimed at putting together collections of images for a particular purpose, such as a scrapbook or photography portfolio. The three programs don't feel as if they belong together, though.

As an everyday image enhancement tool PhotolImpact is not the most productive package. However, it does have some great features that you won't find elsewhere. It's also cheaper than the other packages and often heavily discounted: at the time of writing, for example, a short-term manufacturer's offer brought it down to under £25. If you can find it at that price, it's hard to resist.

XARA

Xtreme 2.0

★★★★★

£53 inc VAT

Xara is the wildcard in this pack. We've included it because it's a popular and affordable graphics package that may appeal to anyone who wants to do more with digital photos. It's different from the other products on test in that it's essentially a drawing program with some image-editing features built in. This means it has a limited range of photo-manipulation tools. Still, it's a great introduction to vector drawing – a completely different approach to graphics that offers lots of creative possibilities. It can also be used to combine images with text and other graphic elements.

Xara presents you with a blank canvas, and when you open an image it's placed on to this as an image layer. Double-clicking it opens Xara Picture Editor, which offers a small but useful range of correction tools. The Enhance option shows sliders for brightness, contrast, colour and blur/sharpen; clicking the Auto Enhance button moves the sliders to suggest settings for your particular image, and

you can adjust them for the best result. There's also a red-eye removal tool and, oddly, a 3D bump map filter, which you can use to apply lighting effects or convert an image to a greyscale bas-relief. Like the other image editors, Xara Picture Editor also supports the Photoshop plug-in format, so you can add extra filters and effects that are widely available as freeware, shareware and commercial packages.

Back in the main program window, more exciting options are hidden away on the Utilities menu. Special Effects opens a dialog offering a few filters, including Sharpen, Blur and edge detection effects, plus the ability to set up your own custom filter, technically a 'convolver', consisting of a grid of nine values that will be applied to each pixel and its neighbours.

Also accessed from the Utilities menu is Bitmap Tracer. This converts a bitmap image into vector shapes, something that no image editor can do. What makes this interesting is that you can fine-tune the way the image is converted, so you'll end up with a stylised but recognisable



▲ Bitmap tracing is a fascinating way to create new artwork from photos, and Xara Xtreme gives you plenty of control over the process

rendering of a photo or an abstract composition in coloured blobs. The resulting shapes can be edited like any others using Xara's powerful drawing tools and effects.

Whether you mess around with images or leave them alone, you can also use Xara to arrange them in layers with other graphics and text. Although you don't get project wizards, Xara's content palettes, known as galleries, have built-in links to downloadable templates and graphics provided free by the manufacturer, so there's plenty to get you started.

If you're mainly interested in correcting photos, bear in mind that our rating for Xara Xtreme reflects its overall quality and usability, not its capability as an image editor; functions such as selecting areas are absent, for example. Still, it's a program that anyone interested in graphics should take a look at. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Powerful vector drawing tools
- ✓ Effective bitmap tracer
- ✗ Limited image editing

IMAGE-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/XP, Pentium or equivalent processor, 128MB RAM, 20MB disk space
 SUPPLIER www.amazon.com
 DETAILS www.xara.co.uk